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Parallelism and Antithesis: Structural Principles in the Mind and in Literature from a Chinese Perspective

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Roman Jakobson famously defined poetry as pivoting on the metaphorical axis with parallelism as a major feature, and James Kugel argues that parallelism is the defining feature of biblical poetry. The parallel structure – including its variations of symmetry and antithesis – is crucial for classical Chinese poetry. In drawing on both Chinese and Western critical views on the symmetrical structure of parallelism and antithesis, this paper will explore the relationship between the cognitive and linguistic correlation in the formation of parallel structure in literary language, particularly poetry, and argue for the basis of parallelism as deeply embedded in the mind and manifested in literary expressions.

A parallel or balanced configuration is something we live by and encounter everywhere; it constitutes the basic structural principle of our own body, of the world and our experience of it. Such configurations always come in pairs. Life and death set the temporal limits of each individual existence, and heaven and earth mark the spatial boundaries of behaviour and activities of all living beings, including humans. Up and down, left and right, before and after, all these are fundamental categories that orientate and coordinate both our physical and mental actions. The two categories or items in a parallel configuration may form various relationships – complementary, contrastive, competitive, antagonistic, dichotomous, or reciprocal and harmonious. This is the wisdom of dialectics we learn from ancient philosophers. 'What is opposed brings together; the finest harmony [*harmonia*] is composed of things at variance, and everything comes to be in accordance with strife,' as Heraclitus of Ephesus (535–475 BC) put it beautifully (Heraclitus, in Curd 1996, 35):

> Things taken together are whole and not whole. [Something which is] being brought together and brought apart, in tune and out of tune; out of all things there comes a unity, and out of a unity all things. (Heraclitus, in Curd 1996, 34)

He articulated this idea many times in parallel expressions:

> We step into and we do not step into the same rivers. We are and we are not. [...] Cold things grow hot, a hot thing cold, a moist thing withers, a parched thing is wetted. [...] The same thing is both living and dead, and the waking and the sleeping, and young and old; for these things transformed are those, and those transformed back again are these. (Heraclitus, in Curd 1996, 36)

And again: 'All things are an exchange for fire and fire for all things, as goods for gold and gold for goods' (Heraclitus, in Curd 1996, 37).

Parallelism in language is not just a rhetorical embellishment, but it reveals a parallelism in cognition, and this is not unique to Heraclitus or the ancient Greeks. The Chinese Daoist philosopher Laozi (Lao-tse), who lived before Heraclitus in the early sixth century BC, also gave parallel expressions to very similar ideas: 'Having and not-having generate one another; difficulty and easiness complement one another; long and short are formed in comparison; high and low are mutually defined; different sounds come together to harmonize; before and after follow one another,' says Laozi (Wang 1954, 1–2). 'Turning back is the way the *dao* moves; weakness is the way the *dao* functions. All things under the heaven are generated from having-ness, and having-ness from nothingness' (Wang 1954, 25). Parallel expressions are also typical of the biblical style, particularly of the Old Testament; for example, 'And God said, Let there be light: and there was light' (Genesis 1:3). 'So God created man in his *own* image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them' (Genesis 1:27). Repetition becomes a necessary rhetorical marker of parallelism, especially in older forms of poetry, in oral literature, and in folk songs.

According to Ferdinand de Saussure, language itself is structured on parallel principles of comparison and differentiation, which is a manifestation of the deeply embedded 'binary opposition' in thinking. Words are not defined in or by themselves, but through differentiation from other words. 'In language there are only differences,' says de Saussure: 'Even more important: a difference generally implies positive terms between which the difference is set up; but in language there are only differences *without positive terms*' (de Saussure 1959, 120, emphasis in original). Indeed, concepts and words such as up and down, left and right, day and night, etc., make sense only in comparison and differentiation from one another. 'Our conceptions arise through comparison,' as Sigmund Freud also says in a review of Karl Abel's *Über den Gegensinn der Urworte* ('On the Antithetical Sense of Primal Words'): 'Were it always light we should not distinguish between light and dark, and accordingly could not have either the conception of, nor the word for, light'. And he goes on to quote Abel to put emphasis on the binary opposition in thinking and conceptualization: 'Man has not been able to acquire even his oldest and simplest conceptions otherwise than in contrast with their opposites; he only gradually learnt to separate the two sides of the antithesis and think of the one without conscious comparison with the other' (Freud 1959, 187). Freud is interested in the work on antonymies in language because his own theory of psychoanalysis is

predicated on the opposition between the conscious and the unconscious, between reality and dreams or fantasies. Comparison and contrast, parallelism and antithesis, all these are so basic in thinking and language that we tend to forget their ubiquitous presence and become unaware of their functioning in our daily speech and activities.

Literature, however, as the Russian formalists and the Czech structuralists tell us, wakes us up from that habitual forgetfulness by making the familiar strange, and brings us to the fresh sensation about the world we live in through the technique of 'defamiliarization'. 'If we start to examine the general laws of perception, we see that as perception becomes habitual, it becomes automatic,' says Victor Shklovsky (1965, 11). But 'art exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone *stony*' (Shklovsky 1965, 12, emphasis in original). The emphasis on 'defamiliarization' may seem to legitimize or even advocate the avant-garde of the fin-de-siècle art and literature at the beginning of the twentieth century, but literature in general, and poetry in particular, do make us pay more attention to language and its parallel structure. It is almost a universal phenomenon in all literary traditions that the poetic language is distinct from the ordinary language in calling attention to itself as a special form of language with emphasis on its aesthetic appeal. Roman Jakobson argues that language works on the two axes of 'positional (namely syntactic) contiguity' represented by metonymy, which is important in narratives, and 'semantic similarity' represented by metaphor, which is essential for poetry. The interaction of these two axes of syntactic contiguity and semantic similarity, the metonymic and the metaphoric, can be seen everywhere in language, but is especially pronounced in poetic parallelism: 'Rich material for the study of this relationship is to be found in verse patterns which require a compulsory parallelism between adjacent lines, for example in Biblical poetry or in the West Finnic and, to some extent, the Russian oral traditions' (Jakobson and Halle 1956, 77). About biblical poetry, James Kugel argues convincingly with copious examples that what makes biblical text poetic is neither quantitative metres as in ancient Greek poetry, nor rhyme or alliteration as in many other kinds of poetry, but a parallel A + B structure of the biblical lines. Such a parallelism 'was as much a habit of mind as a formal prescription,' says Kugel, as it is found 'throughout the Bible, not only in 'poetic' parts but in the midst of narratives (especially in direct discourse), in detailed legal material concerning the sanctuary and the rules of sacrifices, in genealogies, and so forth' (Kugel 1981, 3). The two parts of a parallel line, the A + B structure, he argues, must not be treated as a simple repetition or balance; in fact, the second part, the B half, is more significant and emphatic. 'What is the essence of biblical parallelism?' asks Kugel, and then he gives the answer:

> What this means is simply: B, by being connected to A – carrying it further, echoing it, defining it, restating it, contrasting with it, *it does not matter which* – has an emphatic, 'seconding' character, and it is this, more than any aesthetic of symmetry or paralleling, which is at the heart of biblical parallelism. (Kugel 1981, 51, emphasis in original)

In other words, biblical parallelism is not simply a binary opposition or a perfect symmetry, but the second B part serves different functions to support, to reconfirm, or to contrast, even to gainsay what has been expressed in the first or A part. The two parts are not simply parallel, but form a sort of unequal relationship in which the second part is the more emphatic and significant.

Again, parallelism is not unique to biblical poetry, although on the level of semantic or syntactic details, each kind of literary parallelism has its own distinctive features. In a very different literary tradition, we find parallelism not only pervasive in poetry, but even in prose in the classical Chinese language. Let me quote some examples from two ancient collections: one is from *Shi jing* or the *Classic of Poetry*, a Confucian canonical text used for the education of the young and widely cited by scholars, emissaries, and members of the ruling elites, with the earliest poems in that classic dating back to the eleventh century BC. The other is from *Chu ci* or *Songs of the South*, another ancient anthology of poems very different in language, content and style, of which some of the works dating back to the third century BC. Poem no. 23 in the *Classic of Poetry* describes a hunter wooing his love with games wrapped in 'white rushes', and the beauty of his love is portrayed with increasing emphasis in the first two stanzas:

There is a dead roe in the fields,
With white rushes he wraps it up.
There is a girl longing for spring,
The fine young man entices her.

There are shrubs in the woods,
There is a dead deer in the fields.
With white rushes he ties it up,
There is a girl fair as jade.

'Hey, slow down, and be gentle!
Do not touch my kerchief.
Do not make the dog bark!'
(Ruan 1987, 292–293)

The repetition of the dead animals wrapped up with white rushes, probably as presents for the young girl 'fair as jade', forms a parallelism in this song, and repetition is a typical feature of the poetic lines in the *Classic of Poetry*. The repetition of such formulaic lines shows the vestige of folk songs that had very likely been transmitted orally before they were written down as fixed texts in part of the Confucian canon. The dead roe and the dead deer form a pair, and so do the girl and the hunter as a young man, and their interactions in the first two stanzas are expressed in an explicitly parallel structure. The young man brings gifts and 'entices' the girl with the implication of an act of seduction, and the ambiguity of wooing or seducing is highly charged in a poem with erotic tension. This undergoes a further change when in the last stanza the girl cautions her lover to be quiet and discreet, expressed in yet another parallelism: 'Do not touch my kerchief' and 'Do not make the dog

bark!' The repetition of such formulaic lines shows the vestige of folk songs that had very likely been transmitted orally before they were written down as fixed texts of part of the Confucian canon.

The second example is poem no. 167 in the *Classic of Poetry*, in which a soldier laments the change of his old home and the loss of his old folks when he comes back from a long expedition, and the contrast of the past and the present is expressed through the change of season from a lovely spring to a bleak winter:

In the past, on the day I left,
Poplars and willows danced in the wind,
But now I've finally come back,
Down come heavy snow and rain.
Slowly, and slowly we push on the road,
With hunger and thirst in every vein.
My heart aches with sorrow and grief,
But no one here knows my pain.
(Ruan 1987, 414)

In this poem, temporality takes on a note of tragic pathos in a syntactic parallelism and semantic antithesis. This is particularly true of the first four lines, in which the happier days of the past with willows and poplars dancing in a spring breeze form a nostalgic backdrop to highlight the miserable present of a bleak winter with heavy snow and icy rain. The Chinese original has four characters per line, and they form a strict parallelism as the characters are put in corresponding vertical positions of the adjacent lines in a binary opposition or contrastive relation. This can be seen more clearly if we translate the four lines literally in two units as A + B, with four words in each line and strictly in the same word order as the Chinese original, like the following:

Past I went away / Willows poplars dance yearningly
Now I come back / Rain snow flurry heavily

When we divide the four lines into A and B parts, it becomes obvious that it is the B part where the emphasis falls in much the same way as Kugel argues for biblical parallelism; the remembrance of the happier days in the past serves as a foil to set off the sad feeling of loneliness in the present expressed in this poem.

Chu ci or the *Songs of the South*, is another ancient anthology of Chinese poetry somewhat later in time than the *Classic of Poetry* and of a very distinctive style. It is a collection of poems mostly by Qu Yuan (339?–277? BC), a loyal official of the State of Chu, who suffered from the jealousy and calumny of his political enemies, and lost the king's trust. In his poems, Qu Yuan wrote about his own loyalty and virtue, his sadness of being alienated from the king, and his lamentation on the rapid decline of his country. Qu Yuan's major work, *Li sao* or 'Taking Leave of Sorrow', is the longest lyrical poem in ancient Chinese literature and also the earliest autobiographical work, in which fragrant flowers and beautiful women are often used symbolically to stand for virtuous men whose loyalty is not appreciated and whose talents are wasted. In syntactic arrangement, the poetic lines in *Li sao* also show a parallel

structure. The following lines form a parallelism that expresses the poet's keen awareness of the passing of time and the fading of beauty; the falling of leaves and the withering of flowers make the poet keenly aware of the fragility of beauty:

The Sun and the Moon move on, never slow down to pause;
Spring and autumn always revolve, in quick succession.
I see how trees shed their leaves and flowers wither away,
And I fear the fair one will grow old and also fade.
(Hong 1983, 6)

Parallelism developed into a formal requirement in classical Chinese poetry during the Tang dynasty (618–907), often considered the golden time of Chinese poetry. The most important verse form in classical Chinese literature, known as *lü shi* or 'regulated verse', is formulated during the Tang. Each poem in this form has eight lines with five or seven characters per line, and every two adjacent lines form a couplet; the eight lines are thus divided into four couplets with a consistent rhyme, and a strict parallelism is required for the two middle couplets that must be parallel or antithetical in tone, meaning, grammatical category, etc. Du Fu (712–770), generally considered the greatest Chinese poet not only of Tang but of all time, is a master of this form; and the following poem of his is considered one of the very best of *lü shi* or 'regulated verse'. The poem is extraordinary because it contains beautiful parallel lines not only in the middle two, but in all four couplets:

The wind is strong, the sky high, sadly the gibbons are crying,
The islets are clear, the sands white, in circles the birds are flying.
Boundless forests shed their leaves swirling and rustling down,
The endless river flows with waves rolling and running near.
Ten thousand miles, in sorrowful autumn, often as a wanderer I sigh,
A hundred years, old and sick, alone up the high terrace I climb.
In misery and hardships, I hate to see my hair turning all white,
Out of ill fortune and poor health, I have lately abstained from wine.
(Du 1979, 1766)

It is impossible to reproduce every feature of the original, particularly the consistent rhyme scheme, but in translating the poem above, I have tried to stay as close as possible to the original syntactic structure to highlight the perfect parallelism. We can see that each word in a couplet here is strictly parallel to its counterpart to form a pair – thus 'the wind is strong' and 'the islets are clear', 'the sky high' and 'the sands white', 'the gibbons are crying' and 'the birds are flying', 'boundless forests' and 'the endless river', 'ten thousand miles' and 'a hundred years' – all these form a series of parallelism in which each word must contrast with its counterpart in meaning, grammatical function, and especially tone. Chinese is a tonal language, that is, the change of tones is semantically significant and would also change the meaning of a word; so the tonal variation lays the foundation of the musicality of the Chinese language. The most important prosodic rule in a Chinese 'regulated verse' is thus the antithetical parallelism of tones in the adjacent lines of a couplet in addition to contrast in meaning, parts of speech, etc.

The following is another poem by Du Fu written when he was separated from his family during the time of war and was thinking of his wife and children with tenderness in a moonlit night, hoping for a reunion under better circumstances:

Tonight, in Fuzhou this moon
She must be watching in her room alone.
Lovingly I think of our small children,
Chang'an is too vague a memory for them.
Her soft hair must be damp in the fragrant fog,
While cold moonlight falls on her white arm.
When can we all stand by the thin curtains
And let the moon shine on us and dry our tears?
(Du 1979, 309)

The full moon is often used in Chinese poetry as a symbol of harmony and family reunion, and the image of the poet's wife watching the moon alone at the beginning of this poem, suggesting their separation because of the war at the time, forms a contrast to the ending of the poem where the poet hopes to be with his family again under better circumstances, when the moon could shine on them and dry their tears. The first couplet and the last in this poem thus form a parallel or contrastive framework. It is deeply touching that the longing and remembrance of their happier days in Chang'an, the capital city, is something the poet knows that their children are yet too young to understand, which shifts the burden of anxieties and the feeling of loneliness even more heavily on the adults. The 'fragrant fog' and the 'cold moonlight' form a parallel expression, and so do 'her soft hair' and 'her white arm'; this poem is famous for the expression of loneliness and sorrow in subtle and beautifully constructed parallelisms.

Parallelism is so pervasive in classical Chinese literature that it is not only a required feature in poetry, but also very common even in literary prose. A well-known critical treatise, Liu Xie's (465?–522) *Literary Mind or the Carving of Dragons*, is written in a parallel prose and it contains a chapter on parallelism. 'When the creator makes shapes, limbs and bodies are always formed in pairs; through the use of divine principles, nothing is left to stand alone', says Liu Xie. 'When the mind gives rise to literary language, a hundred things are taken into consideration; the high and the low are shown in comparison, and parallelism are formed naturally' (Liu 1958, 588). Here literary parallelism is given a biological and cosmological explanation, traced to a 'divine principle', according to which the world and the human body are created in symmetrical balance. Leonardo da Vinci's Vitruvian man would be an excellent illustration of the idea when we think of the perfect balance of the human body, and indeed that is what Liu Xie had in mind when he traced the origin of parallelism to the structural principle of the human body and all the things and events in the world. Things are always perfectly balanced out as we have learned from Heraclitus, Laozi, and other ancient philosophers. For literature, however, what is important is not so much a symmetrical relationship, but one that tends to tip towards one side for emphasis or enhancement of some effect, meaning, or a point. Liu Xie argues that there are four kinds of literary parallelisms.

'Parallelism of words is easy, while parallelism of events is difficult; antithetical parallelism is superior, while ordinary parallelism is inferior,' he says. 'Parallelism of words is just the pairing of expressions; while that of events is juxtaposing men's lived experiences. Antithetical parallelism refers to what comes together of interest despite the seeming difference of reasoning, while ordinary parallelism indicates the same meaning despite difference in events' (Liu 1958, 588). His idea here is rather similar to the concept of harmony in both Laozi and Heraclitus, that is, of a unity consisting of different sounds or opposite things.

In commenting on some of the famous works in classical Chinese literature written in parallel prose, the erudite modern scholar Qian Zhongshu (1910–1998) remarks with a reference to Liu Xie:

> All the things and their logic often have two sides or two handles, forming a dialectic relationship of the positive and the negative; so parallelism would be most appropriate if one seeks to reach the fullness of meaning in suitable wording. The chapter on parallelism in the *Literary Mind or the Carving of Dragons* says, 'through the use of divine principles, nothing is left to stand alone,' and also says, 'antithetical parallelism is superior,' for it 'refers to what comes together of interest despite the seeming difference of reasoning'; all these indicate the same idea. (Qian 1986, 1474–1475)

As an outstanding critic with high literary sensibilities, Liu Xie does not treat all parallelisms as equal, but he clearly favours those parallelisms that are antithetical in nature. In a way, that is also James Kugel's argument for the more emphatic expressions in the second half of biblical parallelism. Indeed, contrast, antithesis, and even more specifically, antimetaboles, are always impressive when they are shaped by the hands of gifted poets and writers. In a Chinese 'regulated verse', because of the brevity of the form and the necessarily economic use of words, it is not permissible to repeat a word or expression, but in other writings repetition may serve to highlight a philosophical idea or insight, and create a special effect in parallelism. The Daoist philosopher Laozi, as we have seen, loved to express himself in parallelisms. 'The *dao* that can be spoken is not the constant *dao*. The name that can be named is not the constant name', thus begins the famous book named after him, also known as *Dao de jing* or the *Classic of the Dao* (Wang 1954, 1). The Chinese word *dao* has the double meaning of thinking and speaking, so what is translated as 'spoken' here is also *dao* in the Chinese original, so the repetition of the word *dao* highlights the idea that language is inadequate and that the philosophical idea of *dao* is inexpressible.

In his emphasis on the paradox of language and thinking, Laozi famously says: 'The one who knows does not speak; the one who speaks does not know' (Wang 1954, 34). Qian Zhongshu relates this to the mystic idea of the ineffable and compares it with many European examples (see Qian 1986, 455). Among these is Friedrich Schiller's famous adage:

> Warum kann der lebendige Geist dem Geist nicht erscheinen!
> *Spricht* die Seele, so spricht, ach! schon die *Seele* nicht mehr.
> (Schiller 1967, 273)

The parallelism here has the repetition of words that are crucial for the expression of the idea of the ineffable, an idea also emphasized by Ludwig Wittgenstein (1983, 27) in his *Tractatus*: 'What can be said at all can be said clearly; and whereof one cannot speak thereof one must be silent' ('Was sich überhaupt sagen lässt, lässt sich klar sagen; und wovon man nicht reden kann, darüber muss man schweigen').[1] Such epigrammatic sayings ingeniously combine thinking and language in an impressive parallelism, and we can also think of Blaise Pascal's well-known line: 'La coeur a ses raisons que la raison ne connaît point' (Pascal 1913, 191). Like Laozi's repetition of the word *dao*, which plays on the different meanings of thinking and speaking, the interest of Pascal's line also lies in the use of the word *raison* in its different meanings.

The repetition of words in reverse order for rhetorical effect (chiasmus), or antimetabole, often produces memorable poetic lines. Shakespeare's famous line, 'Fair is foul, and foul is fair' (Shakespeare 1967, I.1.11), is not just the witches' clever play on words, but a revelation and a prophecy of equivocation and its tragic consequences. In an autobiographical passage in *Paradise Lost* (1667), John Milton describes the difficult situation in which he found himself after the Restoration, and says with a dauntless spirit in defiance:

> . . . I Sing with mortal voice, unchang'd
> To hoarse or mute, though fall'n on evil days,
> On evil days though fall'n, and evil tongues.
> (Milton 1957, 346)

Parallelism is also a noted feature of Samuel Johnson's writings. The following passage from his 'Preface to Shakespeare' is a good example: 'In the writings of other poets a character is too often an individual; in those of Shakespeare it is commonly a species' (Johnson 2014, 301). Perhaps an even better-known example is the beginning of Charles Dickens's *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859): 'It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair [. . .]' (Dickens 1996, 3). Reading this passage, we are reminded of many others we have seen above, and we may also recall the Chinese critic Liu Xie's remarks about parallelism as a natural outcome governed by a 'divine principle'.

Parallelism and antithesis are also the structural centre of Alexander Pope's verse. When Belinda has lost her lock in *The Rape of the Lock* (1712), she creates a huge fuss which the mock-heroic poem stylizes as a tragic catastrophe, but undercuts by means of the parallelism between serious and trivial events. Thus, in the following extract from Canto II of the poem, the dire omens of impending catastrophe are described in terms of a parallelism between the loss of virginity and the breaking of a vase (where the syntactic parallelism equates the nymph with a frail china vessel,

1 Wittgenstein reiterates this idea in the middle and again at the end of this book (Wittgenstein 1983, 4.116; 7; 79, 189).

and the violation of the rule of chastity with a flaw in the exterior of the vase). This parallelism in the two lines is repeated in the in-line parallelism between 'stain her Honour, or her new Brocade', where honour semantically parallels chastity, and the unfortunate blemish of the vase are equated with staining (or ruining) her (white?) dress. This parallelism within the verse line is repeated in the following two lines where forgetting one's prayers (a serious failing in the early eighteenth century) and missing a masquerade are again set in counterpoint to Diana's Law and Honour on the one hand and the flaw of the vase and the ruined brocade on the other, and in the next line repeated yet another time with the losing one's heart or a necklace. The parallelisms are thus syntactic, repeating the syntax in lines 105 and 106 and then again three times in the relation of first to second part of the verse line in lines 107 to 109, although in the last of these lines the syntactic parallel is reduced to the object position rather than the verb plus object construction. The antitheses function throughout in opposing the serious and the trivial. As is common with Pope, the passage ends in a break of the parallelism which combines the serious and the non-serious in the imagined death of Belinda's dog Shock whose 'fall' is both serious (Shock as a tragic hero) and trivial (it is only a dog, and hence he has the status of the vase, the brocade or the necklace):

> Whether the Nymph shall break *Diana's* Law,
> Or some frail *China* Jar receive a Flaw,
> Or stain her Honour, or her new Brocade,
> Forget her Pray'rs, or miss a Masquerade,
> Or lose her Heart, or Necklace, at a Ball;
> Or whether Heav'n has doom'd that *Shock* must fall.
> (Pope 1998, 62)

We can certainly go on citing many more examples of parallelism in literary, philosophical, historical and other kinds of writings, and of course parallel, symmetrical, or antithetical structures are also important for music and the other forms of art. What has been said is I believe sufficient to my argument. I wish to conclude with the simple idea or understanding that parallelism is the verbal manifestation of a deeply embedded structural principle in the human mind (or psyche) that is basic to our thinking, speaking, and action. This is no ground-breaking discovery, but a simple statement of truth. And yet, truth is often plain and simple, waiting to be known, needing just a simple acknowledgement.

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